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Title: Representation of the Subaltern in Amitav Ghosh's Works

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Synopsis

The works of Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956)—a contemporary Indian English writer of great repute—provide fascinating insights into his creative interpretation of ethnography, anthropology and history. Amitav Ghosh has excavated the history of the marginalized of the society and given them a place in history which the grand narratives of history have denied and overlooked so far. The stories and struggles of these marginalized in time of major historical upheaval is what he captures through his writing. My study focuses on the representation of the marginalized, the oppressed in the works of Amitav Ghosh by focusing on the Indian society under the shadow of colonialism and various ethnic and trade strife like the opium trade. My thesis also interrogates the reasons behind the forced migration of Indian labors to various part of the globe specially as girmitiyas to have their ends meet.

I have divided my work chronologically into six chapters including the conclusion. I have discussed all the novels of Amitav Ghosh in the first four chapters. I have not included the last part of the trilogy *The Flood of Fire* in my dissertation as it was not published during the planning and conceptualization of my dissertation. I have discussed *In An Antique Land* as the fifth chapter (although it is a work of non-fiction) as it is a fundamental work that revolves around the search and life of a subaltern.

The first chapter basically focuses on the concept of the 'subaltern'. It also focuses on the history of this word propounded by Antonio Gramsci. The year 1982 saw the onset of Subaltern Studies by a group of South Asian scholars interested in South Asia's postcolonial societies and the developing nations who came to be known as the 'Subaltern Studies Group' (SSG). They were mainly concerned about the masses instead of the elite. The eminent figures of the group were Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakrabarty Spivak, Edward Said, Partha Chatterjee , Dipesh Chakraborty, Sudipta Kaviraj, Gyan Pandey, David Hardiman, Shahid Amin, Gautam Bhadra et al. They did not forget to talk about the subalterns like Santhals and many other people belonging to the lower economic and social strata of the society who took an active part in India's freedom movement. They also talked about people who were minor in terms of their race and gender.

I have included Ranajit Guha's *Elementary aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* which is a foundational document of Subaltern Studies in my first chapter. Guha is anxious with the mentality, values, ideas, and social structure behind peasant movements in colonial India between 1783 and 1900. At every turn this book highlights the threats of reading the

methods of insurgency with a political grammar based on mid-twentieth century nation-state political forms. In this light this book will help to analyze the works of fiction and the subaltern characters of Amitav Ghosh. I have discussed Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty's canonical essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" Published originally in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988) and a further revision in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) possibly best exhibits her deep anxiety for the procedures whereby postcolonial studies paradoxically carries on the essence of political supremacy, economic abuse, and cultural erasure by using, appointing and practicing the same system. I have also included Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. Subaltern Studies have concerned themselves with the concept of race and how people (considered of inferior race) were exploited.

In the second chapter I have discussed the first two works of fiction i.e. *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*. *The Circle of Reason*, published in 1986, weaves into the narrative diverse discourses onglobal migration, national power as bureaucratic fetishism, science as social mission, etc. It runs the whole gamut of experiences in the wake of the Indian nationalist struggle of 1930's, the Bangladesh war of 1971 and the international tide of migration to the Middle East of the 1970's. The representation of the women migrants echoes Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern speak?".According to Gayatri C. Spivak, this attempt of giving a voice to the silenced (women) who have been erased from the pages of history is not a simple project. According to her, the lives of the Third World Women are so intricate and disorganized that they cannot be described in the simple vocabulary of a Western discourse. In her groundbreaking essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak is especially worried about the subalterns who "are poor, black and female" (Spivak, 90).

Like the first novel, migration remains a major theme in his second fiction *The Shadow Lines*. Amitav Ghosh questions the concept of borders and nation by unearthing the continuous history of transnational flow and migration that started many centuries ago. He also brings to the fore the history of the '*subaltern cosmopolitan'* who moved out of the nation state out of his own will for a better future.

The third chapter of my dissertation discusses the next three novels written by Amitav Ghosh—*The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004). The underlying commonality between all the three novels is the ascent or rise of the subaltern. The subaltern characters in these works of fiction are presented in all new *avatar* or role. Characters like Mangala, Rajkumar and Kusum show not only signs of consciousness and agency but also the desire to raise a voice against the authorities, in spite ofbeing subaltern. Their undaunted courage and spirit make them break the shackles of fear and oppression. I have divided this chapter into three different sections and have discussed the three novels individually under each section.

The next chapter i.e. Chapter 4 discusses the first two parts of the Ibis trilogy *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). These two multi-layered and multi-character novels spin over many years and with many important events of history mainly the opium trade and the opium war. Besides this major historical event the narrative also throws light on the conditions of indentured labors or *Girmitiyas*, the condition of subalterns and specially that of women.

In *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh attempts at contesting the position of the subaltern workers, lascars and Girmitiyas as present in the archive of the colonizers and simultaneously establishes

a link between these subaltern people and the opium trade which symbolized power, greed and hegemony of the Imperialist. The experiences of the indentured labourerstheir journey towards an unknown destiny in a ship called *Ibis* and the fate of these migrants is chronicled by Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies*. These indentured labourers were known as *girmitiyas*. Amitav Ghosh makes this first part of his Trilogy *Sea of Poppies* a lens through which his readers witness history completely from the angle of the colonized. Thus, the daily experiences of the girmitiyas are chronicled in this novel. Amitav Ghosh also attempts to build an egalitarian community in the Ibis just as he had done in *The Circle of Reason*. This new found community in the *Ibis*, uprooted from their family and society, in their attempt to negotiate their exilic position, constructs a pseudo familial community. In reviving the old diaspora of indentured labourers Ghosh attempts to rewrite the history of the subalterns whose existence has been systematically obliterated by the grand narratives of history. Ghosh brings to life the oversees migration and the problems faced by the coolies on their journey. Ghosh brings before us an important and tumultuous period of history painted more realistically than idealistically..

The story of *River of Smoke*is interwoven with the opium fields and factories of the Ganges and Calcutta along with the transportation of coolies. The opium produced were illegallytraded in China's Pearl River. It is through this Pearl River that some of the characters of *Sea of Poppies* travel from Calcutta to Canton—the Chinese Empire. The novel divests its attention from the coolies of *Sea of Poppies* to the opium trade in China which finally leads to the Opium Wars.

Chapter 5 deals with the subaltern slave *In An Antique Land* (1992). It is one of the most fundamental texts of Amitav Ghosh related to subaltern studies. Though a work of non-fiction, my dissertation would be incomplete without the discussion of *In An Antique Land.*Thoroughly researched as an anthropological and historical thesis, the work revolves round investigating the life history of an invisible subaltern protagonist Bomma—an Indian slave in the mid-twelfth century of a trader named Abraham Ben Yiju. Like most of his works where Ghosh has delved deep to explore and interrogate the life of subalterns and the voiceless people of history, even here Ghosh has ravaged and ransacked historical records in search of Bomma.

Work Cited

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